

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5586

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 3 DAMASCUS 5052

NODIS/CHEROKEE

DEPT PLEASE PASS SECRETARY FROM ATHERTON

E.O. 11652: XGDS-3

TAGS: PFOR, SY, US

SUBJ: ASSISTANT SECRETARY ATHERTON'S MEETING WITH PRESIDENT

ASAD AND FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM - WEDNESDAY - DECEMBER 17

1. SUMMARY: HAD MORNING MEETING DECEMBER 17 WITH KHADDAM AND THEN AFTERNOON AND EVENING SESSION WITH ASAD AND KHADDA. FOREIGN MINISTER FOLLOWED PREDICTABLE LINE ON SUBSTANCE BUT EXPRESSED HIMSELF AS EARNESTLY AS ASAD ABOUT SYRIA'S HOPE TO DEVELOP COMMON GROUND WITH USG FOR JANUARY DEBATE. OUR NOVEMBER 30 VOTE CLEARLY MADE DEEP IMPRESSION ON BOTH MEN AND ENCOURAGED THEM SEEK REPEAT EXPERIENCE OF COOPERATION. WITH BOTH I BORE DOWN HEAVILY ON THE LIMITS BEYOND WHICH WE CANNOT GO AND RISKS INVOLVED IN PUSHING US BEYOND THOSE LIMITS. ASAD, I FELT, WAS GROPING IN ATTEMPT FORMULATE SYRIAN STRATEGY FOR JANUARY. HE WAS UNUSUALLY PNEISIVE AND DISCOURSED AT LENGTH ON THEME THAT SYRIA, IN ORDER TO MOVE PEACE PROCESS FORWARD, FELT IT MUST ACHIEVE SOMETHING FOR PALESTINIANS THROUGH AN ENHANCED PLO ROLE. NOT TO DO THAT, HE IMPLIED WOULD BE BEYOND LIMITS OF SYRIAN FLEXIBILITY. HE SEEMED UNDERSTAND PROBLEM WHICH PLO POSITION TOWARD ISRAEL CAUSED US. ASAD VOLUNTEERED HE HAD BEEN THINKING FURTHER ABOUT A NEGOTIATING STEP INVOLVING SYRIANS AND PALESTINIANS. SPOKE OF COMBINED SYRO-PALESTINIAN DELEGATION BUT MADE CLEAR THAT PALESTINIAN REPRESENTATIVE MUST BE FROM PLO. SAID ARAFAT HAD DENIED TO HIM AUTHORSHIP OF APPROACH TO USG RE WEST BANK MOVEMENT. WE

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AGREED ON NEED MAINTAIN CLOSE CONTACT. END SUMMARY.

2. KHADDAM MEETING. KHADDAM OPENED WITH STATEMENT OF APPRECIATION FOR U.S. VOTE ON SCR 381. OUR "CONSTRUCTIVE" ATTITUDE HAS LEFT AN EXCELLENT IMPRESSION IN SYRIA. HE EMPHASIZED SYRIA SEES IT IN ITS INTEREST TO REACH PRIOR AGREEMENT WITH U.S. ON SUBSTANCE OF THE JANUARY DEBATE "WITHIN THE LIMITS OF SYRIA'S SEARCH FOR A JUST AND DURABLE PEACE WHICH DOES NOT CONTRADICT ITS NATIONAL INTERESTS." U.S. IS A PRINCIPAL PARTY TO THE QUESTION AND SYRIAN-U.S. AGREEMENT IN JANUARY WOULD IMPACT FAVORABLY ON OVERALL PEACE PROCESS. USG ALREADY KNEW SYRIA'S IDEAS ON PROCEDURES FOR RESUMING NEGOTIATIONS. HE WOULD NOT REPEAT FAMILIAR GROUND; IT WAS MORE USEFUL TO DISCUSS THE COUNCIL MEETING ITSELF.

3. SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 381 CALLS FOR DISCUSSION OF MIDDLE EAST PROBLEM INCLUDING THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM. ITS PASSAGE HAS CHANGED THE BASIS FOR FUTURE DEBATE AS ORIGINALLY CONCEIVED IN RESOLUTIONS 242/338. MIDDLE EAST SITUATION IS NOW DEFINED AS INCLUDING "THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION," AND "ALL RELEVANT QUESTIONS" ARE NOW TO BE BROUGHT UP. THESE START WITH THE ORIGINAL RESOLUTION OF 1947 CALLING FOR JEWISH AND ARAB STATES TO BE CREATED IN PALESTINE AND GO UP THROUGH UNGA RES. 3236. HOWEVER MUCH WE MAY DIFFER ON DETAILS, ALL STATES INVOLVED, INCLUDING U.S., NOW RECOGNIZE THAT PALESTINIANS ARE ONE OF THE MAIN CONCERNS. WE ALSO ALL AGREE THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ATTAIN A JUST AND DURABLE PEACE WITHOUT SOLVING ALL PROBLEMS OF THE MIDDLE EAST.

4. SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 242 IS HISTORICALLY ROOTED, "DEALING WITH THOSE ASPECTS OF THE MIDDLE EAST PROBLEM ARISING FROM THE 1967 WAR." SECURITY CONCIL MUST NOW EXPAND FRAMEWORK OF DEBATE. WHAT IS NEEDED IS A NEW RESOLUTION TO COMPLEMENT AND COMPLETE 242. THE SECURITY COUNCIL CLEARLY RECOGNIZED THIS IN ADOPTING SCR 381. WHETHER OR NOT ISRAEL AGREES TO ACCEPT A NEW RESOLUTION, IS NOT IMPORTANT; SECURITY COUNCIL HAS A BASIC RESPONSIBILITY TO THE UN CHARTER AND ITS OWN PREVIOUS RESOLUTIONS TO PRESERVE PEACE AND SECURITY.

5. SYRIA, TAKING U.S. DOMESTIC SITUATION INTO CONSIDERATION, HAS CONCLUDED THAT IT WOULD BE A POSITIVE HELP TO U.S. POLICY
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MAKERS FOR THE SECURITY COUNCIL TO ADOPT THIS NEW RESOLUTION. USE OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL FORUM WILL DIMINISH ZIONIST PRESSURES ON U.S.

6. SYRIA FORESEES STRAIGHTFORWARD, SIMPLE PROCEDURES FOR THE SC DEBATE, IN CONSONANCE WITH UN CHARTER AND SYRIA'S DESIRE FOR PEACE. THE COUNCIL SHOULD MEET, REVIEW THE SITUATION, DEBATE ALL RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS AND THEN PASS RESOLUTION WHICH

WOULD INCLUDE PERHAPS THREE ELEMENTS: (A) FIXING A LIMITED PERIOD OF TIME FOR ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM ALL OCCUPIED TERRITORIES; (B) LAYING THE BASIS FOR RECOGNITION OF THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM IN LIGHT OF UN RESOLUTIONS, STARTING FROM THAT OF 1947; AND (C) DESCRIBING THE PREREQUISITES FOR A JUST PEACE AS SET FORTH IN UN CHARTER.

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7. THE COUNCIL WOULD ASK ALL PARTIES TO IMPLEMENT THIS RESOLUTION UNDER THE SECRETARY GENERAL'S SUPERVISION. IT WOULD FIX THE TIME PERIOD FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND THE COUNCIL WOULD BE ASKED TO ASSEMBLE AT THE END OF THIS PERIOD TO TAKE THE NECESSARY MEASURES IN LIGHT OF THE UN RESOLUTIONS.

8. KHADDAM OBSERVED THAT ON THIS POINT SYRIA AND EGYPT ARE IN AGREEMENT. EGYPTIANS HAVE TOLD THE PALESTINIANS THAT THEY WOULD DRAFT A STRONG RESOLUTION CALLING FOR WITHDRAWAL FROM ALL OCCUPIED TERRITORIES BY ISRAEL AND APPLICATION OF UNGA RES. 3236 (1974). THIS IS ATTITUDE OF ALL ARAB STATES. U.S. SHOULD NOT BELIEVE WHAT IT HEARS FROM SOME ARAB LEADERS THAT THEY WILL NOT SUPPORT A STRONG RESOLUTION, AS OUTLINED ABOVE. ATHERTON MAY HEAR ONE THING IN CAIRO BUT SOMETHING DIFFERENT WILL HAPPEN IN NEW YORK.

9. DRAWING ON TALKING POINTS YOU APPROVED, I OBSERVED THAT IF DEBATE GOES IN THIS DIRECTION, THERE WILL BE SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES AND WE MAY MOVE TOWARDS A CONFRONTATION WHICH WE SEE IN SYRIA'S AND OUR INTEREST TO AVOID. ACCEPTANCE BY ALL PARTIES INCLUDING ISRAEL IS ESSENTIAL IF ANYTHING IS TO HAPPEN.

KHADDAM NOTED THAT FOREGOING WERE SYRIA'S PRELIMINARY VIEWS WHICH SHOULD BE DISCUSSED IN WASHINGTON, WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF OUR COMMON DESIRE FOR PEACE; SECRETARY KISSINGER'S FRANKNESS HAD ALWAYS BEEN APPRECIATED BY SYRIA. KHADDAM, WHO WAS LESS FEISTY THAN I HAVE EVER SEEN HIM, WAS CONFIDENT THAT SYRIA AND U.S. COULD HELP EACH OTHER MOVE BEYOND PREVIOUSLY CONCEIVED LIMITS OF
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ACTION. HE PREDICTED THAT ISRAEL WOULD ATTEND THE DEBATE WITH ALLON READING THE GOI STATEMENT; MEANWHILE ISRAELIS WILL BE BARGAINING FOR U.S. CONCESSIONS.

10. ASAD MEETING. IN INITIAL HOUR-AND-A-HALF AFTERNOON SESSION WITH ASAD, ATTENDED BY KHADDAM AND MURPHY, I MADE VERBATIM PRESENTATION OF AGREED TALKING POINTS. ASAD INTERRUPTED ONLY ONCE, SEEKING CLARIFICATION WHETHER WE CONCEIVED OF SYRIAN-ISRAELI TALKS AND GENEVA CONFERENCE AS HAPPENING SIMULTANEOUSLY. REPLIED WE HAD THOUGHT OF THEM AS ALTERNATIVES BUT THERE WAS NO REASON THEY COULD NOT OCCUR SIMULTANEOUSLY. AT END OF PRESENTATION, ASAD SAID HE WAS TROUBLED. HE FOUND NO NEW ELEMENTS IN OUR POSITION -- NO "WINDOW" THROUGH WHICH TO ESCAPE FROM THE IMPASSE WHICH OUR CONCEPTION OF JANUARY DEBATE APPEARED TO CREATE. KHADDAM INTERJECTED "THEY ARE TAKING A STEP BACKWARDS." ON THAT NOTE, WE BROKE FOR LUNCH TO RECONVENE LATE IN THE EVENING.

11. ASAD OPENED OUR SECOND SESSION ASKING WHAT U.S. EXPECTED AS OUTCOME OF SC DEBATE? REPLIED WE HAD NO FOREGONE CONCLUSIONS; THIS WAS PRELIMINARY EXCHANGE AND YOU WANTED TO HEAR SYRIAN VIEWS BEFORE FORMULATING USG APPROACH, WHILE AT SAME TIME MAKING CERTAIN THERE WAS NO MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT LIMITS BEYOND WHICH WE COULD NOT BE PUSHED; OUR HOPE WAS FOR RESULT THAT WOULD NOT BLOCK AND, IF POSSIBLE, WOULD FACILITATE NEGOTIATING PROCESS. ASAD COUNTERED WE CLEARLY HAD IDEA THAT IF PLO DID NOT RECOGNIZE SCR 242, U.S. WOULD OPPOSE ACCEPTING PLO AS PARTY TO PEACE EFFORT. HE COMPLAINED GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF U.S. CONSIDERATIONS IGNORED QUESTION OF PALESTINE. ONE CONCLUSION, PERHAPS ERRONEOUS, WAS THAT WE SAW NO JUSTIFICATION FOR SC DEBATE. SC WILL NATURALLY BUILD ON ITS OWN PAST RESOLUTIONS IN DESIGNING NEW RESOLUTION BUT WOULD NOT SIMPLY REPEAT PAST RESOLUTIONS. SYRIA IS TRYING NOT TO FOCUS ON ANY ONE PAST SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION BUT ON THE WHOLE PROBLEM. IT WOULD NOT GO TO SC JUST TO DEBATE 338 BUT TO DISCUSS THE ISSUE OF PEACE. SYRIA DID NOT INTEND TO CANCEL ANY RESOLUTION. SYRIA AIMS AT ACHIEVEMENT OF A JUST PEACE. IN PAST NEGOTIATIONS, SYRIA AND U.S. AGREED THAT THE PRINCIPAL ELEMENTS OF PEACE WERE: LANDS OCCUPIED IN 1967, THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION AND THE REQUIREMENTS OF PEACE. ASAD REHEARSED FAMILIAR ARGUMENT WHY PLO OPPOSED TO SCR 242, NOTING, HOWEVER, THE PROBLEM WAS NOT
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242 OR 338. SC DEBATE WOULD NATURALLY DISCUSS VARIOUS RESOLUTIONS BUT ONLY IMPORTANT QUESTION WAS THE DEBATE'S OUTCOME. MOST IMPORTANT NEED WAS TO DEFINE ELEMENTS OF THE PROBLEMS OBSTRUCTING PEACE AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM.

12. PRESIDENT URGED CONTINUED FRANKNESS IN U.S.-SYRIAN RELATIONS. WHEN SYRIA SPOKE OF ITS SATISFACTION WITH US VOTE ON NOVEMBER 30, IT HAD MEANT IT. IT DISREGARDED U.S. COMMENTARIES ON VOTE BECAUSE IT UNDERSTOOD OUR REASONS. SYRIA'S ATTITUDE ON NOVEMBER 30 HAD BEEN DESIGNED TO MOVE THE PROBLEM TOWARDS PEACE IN REASONABLE AND PRACTICAL MANNER. SYRIA BELIEVED THAT THIS COULD BE REPEATED IN JANUARY. SYRIA WAS SEEKING WAY TO REDUCE ZIONIST PRESSURE ON U.S. OPINION. AMERICA CANNOT EASILY AGREE TO PLO PRESENCE AT GENEVA WHILE PLO PRESENCE AT THE COUNCIL DOES NOT EMBARRASS THE USG. IN THE COUNCIL, OTHER COUNTRIES SHARE THE STAGE ALONG WITH THE U.S.S. AMERICA CAN, OF COURSE, USE ITS VETO BUT PRESIDENT SAID HE COULD NOT BELIEVE

AMERICAN CITIZEN WANTED HIS VETO POWER PUT AS A CARD IN ISRAELI HANDS TO BE USED WHEN ISRAEL DESIRED. SURELY HE PREFERRED IT KEPT UNDER HIS OWN GOVERNMENT'S CONTROL TO USE FOR AMERICAN INTERESTS.

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NODIS CHEROKEE

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13. ASAD URGED WE TRY TO DEVELOP A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION, ESPECIALLY SINCE U.S., ITSELF, HAD AFFIRMED THAT IT MUST BE TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION TO ACHIEVE PEACE. IN THIS WAY THE WORLD WOULD BE SPARED FURTHER COMPLICATED DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS, INCLUDING THOSE BY USG, WHICH MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT SUCCEED. SYRIA SHARED U.S. OPINION THAT IF NO PROGRESS WERE ACHIEVED IN SC DEBATE THEN THERE WOULD BE A STALEMATE AND A RETURN TO CONDITIONS OF 1973. COMMENTING IN TROUBLED MANNER, ASAD SAID: "WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT? WE WANT FORWARD MOVEMENT -- THIS IS SERIOUS TALK, NOT MANEUVER. BUT LET US MOVE IN THE LIGHT -- NOT IN THE SHADOWS. THE DARKNESS MAY HIDE SERIOUS RISKS AND SETBACKS TO ALL THOSE WORKING FOR PEACE. THE PRESENT SITUATION UNQUESTIONABLY HAS POSITIVE ASPECTS. ONE IS THE WILL OF PEOPLE FOR A JUST PEACE BUT EVEN THAT WILL NOT ENDURE." ASAD THEN NOTED HE DID NOT INCLUDE ISRAELIS AMONG THOSE WHO SEEK A JUST PEACE, CRITICIZING ISRAELI ANNOUNCED PLANS FOR FURTHER GOLAN SETTLEMENTS. (I TOOK THIS OPENING TO INFORM PRESIDENT OF YOUR STRONG REPRESENTATIONS TO ISRAEL DISAPPROVING THESE SETTLEMENTS. SAID WE HOPED TO SEE SOME EFFECT FROM THIS REPRESENTATION.) ASAD THEN REFERRED BRIEFLY TO OTHER ISRAELI VIOLATIONS OF DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT, INCLUDING ADVANCING ITS ROCKETS AND ARTILLERY ON THE HEIGHTS. PRESIDENT SAID HE HOPED WE WOULD TRUST SYRIA'S WORD. REPLIED THAT SUCH TRUST IN EACH OTHER'S WORD WAS AT VERY BASIS OF OUR RELATIONSHIP AND THAT WAS HOW YOU WANTED TO PROCEED IN THE FUTURE.

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14. TOLD ASAD I HOPED I HAD NOT GIVEN IMPRESSION IN OUR EARLIER MEETING THAT WE INTENDED IGNORE EITHER PALESTINIAN QUESTION OR PEOPLE. PROBLEM IS NOT WHETHER TO INCLUDE THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION BUT ONLY HOW AND WHEN PALESTINIANS ARE TO BE INVOLVED IN THE PEACE PROCESS. PLO HAS MAINTAINED POSITION SEEKING DISAPPEARANCE OF ISRAEL. FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM IS NOT WHICH FORUM TO SELECT BUT PLO'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ISRAEL. OUR VIEWS ARE NOT FIXED ON OUTCOME OF SC DEBATE. WE WANTED TO KNOW SYRIA'S POSITION. WE WISHED TO CLARIFY THE LIMITS TO OUR FLEXIBILITY BUT ALSO TO UNDERSTAND SYRIA'S LIMITS AND NEEDS AND TO URGE THAT SYRIA NOT FALL INTO TRAP OF PUSHING U.S. TO POINT WHERE GAINS IN U.S. OPINION IN UNDERSTANDING ARAB POSITION WERE DESTROYED, U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS BEGAN TO DETERIORATE, AND AREA SITUATION AGAIN BECAME FROZEN AND PARALYZED. WITHIN OUR LIMITS WE WOULD SEEK MUTUALLY ACCEPTABLE POSITIONS TO FACILITATE FURTHER PROGRESS. WE HAD BOTH APPROACHED NOVEMBER 30 WITH SOME UNDERSTANDING OF THE OTHER'S NEEDS. WE WANTED TO APPROACH THE JANUARY DEBATE IN THE SAME SPIRIT. ASAD REJOINED HE, TOO, WAS ANXIOUS TO REPEAT THE SAME COOPERATION. HE AGREED IT IMPORTANT THAT WE STAY IN CLOSE TOUCH. SAID HE WAS

CONVINCED THAT GIVEN OUR PAST TALKS AND DEVELOPMENT OF OUR BILATERAL TIES IT WILL BE POSSIBLE TO ARRIVE AT A PRACTICAL RESULT.

15. ASKED PRESIDENT IF HE HAD ANY COMMENT OR INFORMATION THAT MIGHT HELP YOU EVALUATE APPROACH TO USG, WHICH MURPHY HAD PREVIOUSLY REPORTED TO HIM, ALLEGEDLY FROM ARAFAT, CONCERNING POSSIBLE WEST BANK POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS WHICH NEED NOT NECESSARILY INVOLVE THE PLO. PRESIDENT SAID THAT TWO OR THREE DAYS AFTER MURPHY HAD FIRST MENTIONED THIS TO HIM, HE HAD CHECKED WITH ARAFAT. ARAFAT HAD ANSWERED HE KNEW NOTHING OF SUCH AN APPROACH. I SAID THAT WE HAD DONE NOTHING ABOUT IT BECAUSE WE WERE UNCERTAIN OF ITS AUTHENTICITY.

16. AFTER REHEARSING HIS PROBLEMS WITH STEP-BY-STEP DIPLOMACY, PRESIDENT SAID THAT SYRIA'S POSITION REMAINED THAT ANY STEP HAD TO BE A JOINT SYRIAN-PALESTINIAN ONE. HE WAS PREPARED TO DISCUSS VARIOUS FORMULAE FOR NEGOTIATING COMMITTEES -- THEY COULD, FOR EXAMPLE, BE SYRO-PALESTINIAN OR ARAB-PALESTINIAN. SYRIA WOULD INSIST THAT IN ANY JOINT COMMITTEE THEN PALESTINIAN
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INVOLVED WOULD BE A PLO REPRESENTATIVE. HE HASTENED TO ADD THAT HE HAD NOT DISCUSSED HIS CONCEPT WITH THE PLO. I OBSERVED BASIC DIFFICULTY WAS WE UNABLE TO GET ISRAEL TO NEGOTIATE WITH PLO UNDER ANY GUISE. ASAD THEN SAID WHAT ISRAEL WISHED TO IGNORE WAS NOT PLO BUT PEOPLE OF PALESTINE AS A WHOLE. HE LABELED AS "CHEAP BLACKMAILING" OF AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION ISRAELI STATEMENTS WHICH TRIED PORTRAY ANY PALESTINIANS STATE AS SOVIET STOOGES. WHY SHOULD PALESTINIAN STATE BE TIED TO SOVIETS IN DISREGARD OF OTHER STATES IN ME REGION? PALESTINIAN NEED FOR SOVIETS WOULD ENDURE ONLY AS LONG AS ISRAELI PERSECUTION OF PALESTINIANS.

17. QUESTION OF RECENT DOBRYNIN-FORD-KISSINGER MEETING CAME UP. I SAID THAT MOST OF THE DISCUSSION HAD BEEN ABOUT SALT BUT SOVIETS HAD PROPOSED WE BEGIN BILATERAL TALKS ABOUT PROCEDURES TO RECONVENE GENEVA. WE HAD NOT REPLIED TO SOVIETS BUT WANTED SYRIANS TO KNOW THAT IDEA HAD BEEN PUT TO US. I SAID THAT WE WERE TELLING HIM THIS IN CONFIDENCE. ASAD COMMENTED THAT SOVIETS HAD NOT INFORMED SYRIANS.

18. WE ALSO DISCUSSED LEBANESE SITUATION (SEPTTEL) AND MEETING ENDED AT LATE HOUR WITH PRESIDENT SENDING HIS WARM REGARDS TO YOU AND PRESIDENT FORD AND REITERATING HIS DESIRE TO STAY IN CLOSE CONTACT AS WE DEVELOPED OUR RESPECTIVE POSITIONS FOR JANUARY DEBATE.
MURPHY

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